

Anderson faces tax for jail

Amount depends on option taken to ease crowding

By Bob Fowler

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CLINTON - Anderson County residents can expect to pay more taxes to alleviate jail crowding, interim County Mayor Myron Iwanski says.

How much of a property tax hike - the first such increase in eight years - would be needed depends on which solution is chosen, he said.

Even talk of launching a county wheel tax as an option for funding a jail expansion has entered the mix. "At present, I don't think there's a real strong move toward that," Iwanski said.

Following weeks of study, an overview of possible fixes to jail overcrowding will be presented Monday to the county's Jail Committee.

The mayor said he hopes the committee's recommendation can advance to the full commission next month.

"It's a critical issue that we must plot a course of action to eliminate the overcrowding concerns at the jail immediately," County Law Director Jay Yeager said.

Building options range in cost from an estimated \$6 million to \$18 million, and those price tags don't include the cost of adding more jailers.

Four years ago, the jail was expanded to its current 226-bed capacity, but the inmate population has been over capacity for months, sometimes by more than 100.

There are 3,500 arrest warrants waiting to be served and a backlog of cases awaiting grand jury action, according to statistics.

The state has warned that the jail faces decertification unless something is done, Iwanski said.

That action would open up the county to higher insurance premiums, more potential liabilities and the possibility of winding up in federal court.

The jail could even be forced to close, he said.

"The option of doing nothing on this issue is a mistake for all taxpayers of Anderson County," Yeager said.

Iwanski says he's advocating a middle-ground approach. His proposal features a dorm-style lockup for minimum-security offenders and construction of a jail addition to meet the county's needs for the next decade. It carries an \$11 million price tag, not including \$1.2 million more annually in operating costs.

The linchpin for that plan is a more concerted effort to offer alternatives to jail, Iwanski indicated.

He is advocating a return to a county-run probation department that would provide more oversight with participant fees paying for other programs that are alternatives to jail.

The county's probation department became embroiled in controversy several years ago and it was shuttered. A private firm now operates the probation program.

Yeager said the county is now seeking bids on a minimum-security, dorm-style prefab metal lockup with 64 to 128 beds.

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